

HENRY CLAY AT RICHMOND.

THE ABOLITION PETITION.

[The following articles are the latest, and among the best, discussions of Clay's visit to Richmond in 1842, his speech there, and the presentation of a petition asking him to free his own slaves. A careful reading will show that they differ very little in matters of fact, though taking opposite views of the dignity and appropriateness of the conduct of the leading actors.

The first article was originally printed in the *Indianapolis News*, August 24, 1901, and the second was printed at the instance of Judge M. L. Bundy in the *Henry County Tribune*, Spiceland and Newcastle, Ind., January 10, 1908.—EDITOR.]

Charles W. Osborn's Article.

IN the autumn of 1842, Henry Clay, of Kentucky, an aspirant to the presidency, in the course of an electioneering tour, came to Richmond, Ind., and on October 1 spoke to a large concourse of people.

While on the platform and in the presence of the audience, Hiram Mendenhall presented to Clay a petition asking him to liberate his slaves. Clay, in his answer, told Mendenhall to go home and mind his own business. Mendenhall's action in this case has been severely censured. He has been regarded as a kind of gadfly, seeking an opportunity to torment the great statesman in the presence of his political friends. Clay's speech at Richmond has been regarded as a political blunder that cost him the loss of the presidency in 1844. Most of those who have written upon the subject seem to be ignorant of some of the facts connected with the case.

Judge Bundy, of Newcastle, in an article in the *Indianapolis Journal* some two years ago, says the speech made the foundation for a third party of political abolitionists, who nominated James G. Birney, who received votes enough in New York alone to defeat Clay. The Liberty party existed before Clay's speech at Richmond, and Birney received 7,000 votes for President in 1840. The party was organized in Indiana in February, 1841, and delegates appointed to attend the convention that nominated

Birney in 1844. It would be difficult to determine the cause or causes that increased the abolition vote from 7,000 in 1840 to over 62,000 in 1844. This vote was drawn more largely from the Whigs than from the Democrats, because the former were more anti-slavery than the latter. Clay was a slave-holder, and in his "Alabama" letter favored the slave-holding measure of the annexation of Texas under certain conditions. These two things did more, doubtless, to alienate from him the anti-slavery Whigs than his speech at Richmond.

Addison C. Harris, late minister to Austria, in an article published in the *American Friend*, of November 6, 1896, under the title of "A Quaker Episode," attributes the petition to a few so-called anti-slavery Quakers, mostly living at Newport, north of Richmond, who advocated the doctrine of immediate and unconditional emancipation, and who refused to be switched off of this main track of abolitionism by the unjust and impracticable colonization dodge. That these Quakers on learning that Clay was to speak in Richmond on Saturday before the great Sunday of the Indiana Yearly Meeting, prepared a petition, got it numerously signed, placed it in the hands of one of their number named Mendenhall to be presented privately to Clay on Friday evening previous to the speaking, but failing to gain his presence, presented it publicly upon the platform the next day. There is much error in this account. The petition originated in the Indiana State Anti-Slavery Society, an organization wholly undenominational but numbering perhaps more Friends or Quakers than any other one denomination. An annual meeting of this society was held at Newport (now Fountain City), beginning September 5, 1842, and continuing four days. The attendance was too large for the Friends' meeting-house, and they adjourned to a grove fitted up for the occasion. On the first day of the convention it was "On motion resolved that a committee of three be appointed to prepare a petition to be presented to Henry Clay, of Kentucky, when he shall arrive at Richmond, in his visit to this State as contemplated the present season, calling on him to liberate his slaves, and that H. H. Way, Daniel Worth, Peter Crocker and Israel French constitute a committee to present it.

"Resolved, That Matthew R. Hull, Benjamin Stanton and Ziba Casterline constitute a committee to draft said petition."

At the afternoon session I find this record:

"The committee to prepare a petition to Henry Clay presented one, which was adopted, and is as follows:

"To Henry Clay:

"We, the undersigned citizens of Indiana, in view of the declarations of rights contained in the charter of American Independence, in view of that justice that is due from man to his fellow-man; in view of all those noble principles which should characterize the patriot, the philanthropist and the Christian, ask you most respectfully to "unloose the heavy burdens," and that you let the oppressed under your control who call you master go free. By doing so you would give liberty to whom liberty is due, and do no more than justice to those under your charge, who have long been deprived by you of the sacred boon of freedom; and set an example that would result in much good to suffering and debased humanity, and do an act altogether worthy a great and good man.'"

Immediately following the petition is this resolution:

"Resolved, That should Henry Clay refuse to emancipate his slaves, the committee to present the petition be instructed to request him to give his reasons for so refusing."

Clay attended a very large Whig convention at Dayton, O., on September 29, which declared for him for President in 1844, and came on to Richmond, where he was to speak Saturday, October 1. That the petition might be presented publicly, and that violence had been threatened to the committee of presentation, is evident from an editorial in the *Free Labor Advocate and Anti-Slavery Chronicle*, of Newport, under date of September 24, 1842, in answer to the *Richmond Palladium's* statement that it would be wrong and an insult to Clay to present such a petition on his visit to Indiana. The *Advocate and Chronicle* says:

"We hear there are great threats of violence if the committee should attempt to present the petition; and the *Palladium* plainly intimates an expectation of that kind, but professes to discourage it, and acknowledge that a violent opposition would be as bad as the presentation of the petition itself."

The committee on presentation, in making its report, says: "The first object of your committee was to make themselves acquainted with the time that would be most convenient on the part of Henry Clay for their reception. They accordingly addressed him the appended note: 'Richmond, October 1, 1842. To Henry Clay—We, who are appointed a committee, by a large convention of people, to present a petition to Henry Clay, signed by near two thousand citizens of Indiana, respectfully ask him to communicate the hour that such interview would be most convenient. Signed, Daniel Worth, Peter Crocker, Hiram Mendenhall and Samuel Mitchell.' The last two names were substituted in the place of H. H. Way and Israel French, who were absent. The note was presented to Ervin Reed, one of the Clay committee of arrangements, by Mendenhall and Mitchell."

Daniel Worth had no further hand in the presentation of the petition, and in explanation of the fact in a letter dated October 13 and published in the *Advocate and Chronicle* of October 29, says: "It is said to be currently reported in certain quarters that I had too much prudence to make the presentation myself, but was willing to shift it off on friend Mendenhall, who was not known as a member of the committee." Worth further states, "that the reception committee informed them that it was Clay's wish to receive them at his hotel on Sunday morning; that he could not possibly see them sooner, to which they assented and their committee separated. A few minutes later James Rariden announced from the stand to the immense multitude that if the abolitionists had any request to make to Mr. Clay, or paper to present to him, it was Clay's wish that it should be done publicly and on that occasion, that he might give a public answer thereto and make a public declaration of his sentiments on this delicate subject."

Worth says, being separated from the other members of the committee, with little chance of finding them in the immense crowd, and being inclined to look upon Rariden's language as a boast, he made no attempt to find the rest of the committee; that in the meantime the other members of the committee (Crocker, Mendenhall and Mitchell), having obtained proximity to the stand from which Rariden was speaking, and consulting him

further on the subject, went and brought the papers and presented them. "This is the reason why Mr. Mendenhall presented the memorial, and I am glad it was in such good hands. I believe this was an arrangement made to defeat the committee in presenting the petition and disingenuous on the part of its authors." Another version of the sudden change of the time and manner of presenting the petition is that it was discussed on the platform by Clay's personal friends, and that one of them, of the type known as fire-eaters, said let the abolitionists present their petition now and publicly and then give them hell; and that his counsel prevailed, and the first part at least of his program carried out. Mendenhall said the reason he carried the petition to Clay was because neither Crocker nor Mitchell would volunteer to do it.

Mendenhall was a fit person to work his way through a hooting, jeering, threatening crowd, for he was a tall, muscular man, weighing two hundred pounds, then in the prime of manhood, being forty-one years old. He arrived at the speaker's stand with his coat badly cut by the mob, and doubtless would have received personal injury had not Clay stepped to the front of the platform and begged the crowd for his sake and for God's sake to not insult nor do violence to the committee. Mendenhall stepped upon the platform, handed Clay the petition, and when he saw they were not going to give him a chair, he sat down on the floor, a little to one side of the speaker.

Clay read the petition and made it the subject of his discourse. The committee on presentation reported the substance of his speech, of which the following are the principal points: He said the act of presenting the petition was beneath the dignity of an American citizen. "Petitions," he said, "are from inferiors to superiors, or to those having absolute power. The petition should have been brought to Ashland. The signers were Democrats and those of a shade darker, and its design was to create influence against me. Suppose you were traveling through my country and I should ask you to give up your land? But I am aware that you make a distinction in the different kinds of property. We have an idea that whatever the law secures to us as property is property. The declaration of rights of which you speak was not

intended by those who formed that document as you interpret it. All thirteen of the States that framed that declaration held slaves at that very time. Yours is a new interpretation.

"Slavery is a great evil; we are in the midst of it; fastened upon us by Great Britain. There is not a man who deplores slavery more than I do. But the slave must be prepared for freedom before he can receive that great boon. He must have moral cultivation. The Society of Friends takes the right stand in regard to this question. Yours are the revolutionary principles of Thomas Dorr, of Rhode Island, and should the principles of your petition be granted, extermination and blood would be the result. States have rights that you can no more interfere with than you can with nations. I own fifty slaves, and I treat them well; ask my Charles here; he goes as well clad and, I believe, is as honest a man as Mr. Mendenhall. My slaves are worth \$15,000, and if the abolitionists will raise and give them the same amount, I will liberate them. You have put back emancipation fifty years. Go home, Mr. Mendenhall and mind your own business."

Thus it will be seen that Hiram Mendenhall acted only as the agent of the Indiana State Anti-Slavery Society, of which he was a member; that he did not thrust himself upon Henry Clay, but consulted him as to when the interview should take place and whether it should be public or private. The whole affair was simply one of those early moral engagements in the irrepressible conflict of freedom with slavery, which terminated with the close of the War of the Rebellion.

The vision of the seer was imperfect when it showed him that the zeal of the abolitionist had put back the emancipation of the slave fifty years; for not one-half of that time elapsed until American slavery was a thing of the past. But slavery, the cause of the rebellion, was buried at a fearful cost of blood and treasure. To-day we look upon the two principal actors on that Richmond stage in the light of intervening events, through the vista of fifty-nine years and across seven hundred battle-grounds of the Civil War, and over the graves of 500,000 soldiers of the blue and the gray, and the memory of the apologizers for slavery

grows dim, while the memory of the advocates of freedom grows brighter as the years go by.

"Then to side with Truth is noble, when we share her wretched
crust
Ere her cause bring fame and profit, and 'tis prosperous to be
just."

Such nobility belonged to Hiram Mendenhall and his abolition compeers in the early forties, and to-day we regard them as having been at home and attending to the business that belonged to them as American citizens and patriots while advocating the freedom of the slave.

CHARLES W. OSBORN.

Economy, Ind.

Account by Charles and William Coffin.

[Charles F. Coffin, of Chicago, and his brother William, of Pasadena, Cal., I think, are the only persons living who can write a correct history of Clay's visit to Richmond, and the yearly meeting, October, 1842—sixty-five years ago. Charles drove the carriage that conveyed him to the meeting and listened to his speech. He wrote a history and sent it to me and I advised him to have it published in your paper and he wrote me his consent to my request.

M. L. BUNDY.]

In October, 1842, Henry Clay passed through Richmond, Ind., on what was probably an electioneering tour for the presidency, though not ostensibly so. He had been prominent before the public as a candidate for President, and had heretofore been unsuccessful. The Yearly Meeting of Friends in Indiana was being held at this time, and his friends evidently arranged for his arrival there during the yearly meeting—as in those days the meetings were very large, and it was thought he would have a good opportunity to present himself before them. He arrived in Richmond on the 1st of October, 1842, and stopped at what was then known as the "Nixon Hotel," a small, but very neat hotel, afterward known as the "Huntington." There were, as guests, at the hotel, a number of Friends, amongst others, three bridal couples—James D. Ladd, Brooks Johnson and Samuel R. Lippincott. Rhoda M. Johnson, then an unmarried young lady, who afterward became the wife of Charles F. Coffin, accompanied her brother, Brooks Johnson.

Of course the arrival of so distinguished a man as Henry Clay attracted the attention of every one. The brides were introduced to him, and he promptly kissed each one of them. Miss Johnson remarked that she was glad she was not a bride on this occasion, as she did not fancy the looks of Henry Clay. On Saturday afternoon he spoke upon a platform which had been erected on some vacant lots within a block of the hotel. In addition to the large number of Friends attending the yearly meeting, the whole country for miles around turned out to hear this distinguished orator. It was estimated roughly that there were ten thousand persons in sound of his voice. Of course this number was guessed at, but there was certainly a very large number.

The anti-slavery agitation had become very strong by this time, and a large body of abolitionists resided at Newport, ten miles north of Richmond. They met and prepared an address to Henry Clay, asking him to liberate his slaves, and appointed a deputation to present it to him. This deputation was headed by Hiram Mendenhall, who became spokesman of the deputation. They made their way to the platform, and handed the petition to James Rariden, the Congressman from that district, and a very warm friend of Henry Clay's. At Henry Clay's request, he read the petition to him. It excited a great commotion in the audience, who felt it was an uncalled for intrusion at this time, and they might have offered violence to the parties presenting it, but Henry Clay arose and earnestly requested them, on his account, not to do so, but to allow the parties full liberty. He then arose and replied to the address, the committee presenting it being seated upon the platform, and told them that he was opposed to slavery himself; that all the slaves he had, he had inherited from his father—that he had never bought nor sold one—that many of them were old and infirm, and would be unable to provide for themselves if turned loose.

He turned to his body servant, whom he called "Charles" (a colored man), and said to the company: "Here is Charles—he is in a free State, and entirely at liberty to leave me if he desires to do so, and if you who present this petition will prepare a place for my slaves at home where they can be provided for, and enabled to make their living, I will gladly release them all; but

as it is, it would be an act of cruelty which I could not perform; and besides, I have grown up amongst them, and have a degree of attachment to them, which would prevent me from turning them out without the means of subsistence." He then turned to the deputation and poured out a volley of eloquence rarely heard, suggesting to them that they were interfering with something with which they had nothing to do. Standing immediately in front of Mendenhall, and bending almost over him, he closed with a peroration like this: "Go home, Mr. Mendenhall, and attend to your own business, and I will endeavor to see after mine." This scathing rebuke of course touched deeply those to whom it was administered, and they did go home, and did all they could to prevent his election for President. Whether they would have pursued the same course otherwise or not, it is uncertain, but it is supposed to have had much to do in defeating him for President.

On the next day, Sabbath morning, the writer's younger brother, William H. Coffin, stood very near the platform and heard all that was said, the writer himself being a little farther off, but yet heard enough to understand most that was said. Henry Clay desired to attend the large meeting for the public on this Sabbath, and Elijah Coffin, father of the writer, was clerk of the yearly meeting, and consulted with the few leading Friends as to what they should do in the matter. It was concluded to take him to the meeting and place him on one of the raised seats near where the ministers who were to address the meeting sat. An immense crowd came to the meeting, and the writer drove the carriage for his father, who called for Henry Clay, and took him to the meeting house. It was with great difficulty that we could get through the crowd, and it was necessary to drive very slowly, so as to allow people to open a passage way and let the carriage through. On arrival at the meeting house, a tall Friend, named Pleasant Winston, took hold of one of Henry Clay's arms and my father of the other, and then escorted him to the place in the meeting house prepared for him.

He was sufficiently elevated there to be seen by the whole company, and of course was an object of great attraction. Two ministers delivered addresses: one, John Meader, of Providence,

R. I., and the other, Stephen Grellett, of Burlington, N. J. The latter, a Frenchman of distinguished family, who had left France on account of revolutionary proceedings, and after he came to the United States, being thrown with Friends, became a member of the society and ultimately a preacher of the gospel, who traveled over the United States and Europe, and having belonged to a prominent family, was well educated and in every respect a most accomplished gentleman. This enabled him to reach the nobility—in some instances the Kings, and especially the Czar of Russia. His addresses in English were much broken and rather difficult to understand, but were able and eloquent. Henry Clay listened to these speakers with intense interest, turning almost around in his seat in order to see them distinctly, as he was nearly under them. After the close of the meeting the same difficulty occurred in getting him away that had occurred on his arrival, and I had to drive with very great care, and almost run against people in order to get them out of the way, as their curiosity led them to crowd around the carriage in order to get a view of Henry Clay. He left Richmond the next day, and proceeded on his journey westward.

This event, unimportant as it may seem, attracted very great attention throughout the country, and was much commented upon. Many narratives of it have appeared, scarcely any one of which was wholly correct, but the position which the writer and his brother occupied, enable them to give the full facts in regard to the matter, as it occurred at the time.

November 14, 1907.

CHARLES F. COFFIN.

I have carefully read your manuscript, and find it well descriptive of the occasion and subject as I saw it. Henry Clay's speech to Mr. Mendenhall and his compeers was not long, but long enough to well answer the so-called petition, in his lawyer-like, able and senatorial manner. I could almost reproduce it, not in exact words, perhaps, but in sense and point and much of the language used, as I was intensely interested. I was then at heart and conviction, anti-slavery to the bottom, and would have helped in the underground movement, or in any other way to have done any good, practically, in its overthrow.

Henry Clay had made a strong and able speech from a Whig standpoint to that great crowd, and this affair was injected to do all possible to hurt him because he was a slave-holder. Under the circumstances the scathing he gave them was merited, although distorted by them and made to appear in altogether a different light, as was also the affair next day of his attendance at the yearly meeting. So, we have so many partly untrue and distorted accounts of it, yours will be the most truthful, plain, unvarnished and impartial account of the whole affair I have ever yet seen written.

Charles Osborn some years ago wrote a statement of it from his standpoint, which was probably the fairest and most truthful narrative from that side, but he evidently was not present, and gained his information from biased sources.

After James Rariden had received and read the petition publicly from the platform to Henry Clay, he arose and answered somewhat as follows:—(Condensed) "That this petition to him at this time and place was out of order; that petitions were from inferiors to superiors; that he was now an American citizen traveling through Indiana to meet and see his friends, and in no wise a superior, but on an equality with them; that if they had had a real desire to see and talk with him about the slaves at his home, they should have come to Ashland where he would have guaranteed safety and true hospitality; and used them like gentlemen; that he was opposed to slavery, and believed it to be a great evil, but that it was fastened on the colonies by the British government at an early period of our colonial history, and was now so interwoven into the fabric of our social condition and life, especially in the Southern States, that it would be impossible to uproot it at once without destroying our government; that he had never bought or sold a slave, but had about fifty left him by will from his father's estate; that half of them were along in years, some much older than he was, and the rest mostly their children, who had grown up on the plantation; that they had been the companions of his childhood and youth, and he was much attached to them, and felt morally bound to support them in their old age. Now, gentlemen, I will make you an offer, seeing you have come to me with this affair in this public

manner; if you will buy a suitable tract of land in northern Indiana, or Ohio (which could have been purchased very reasonably), to settle these old and infirm people on, and where they can be comfortably cared for, I will agree to turn them over to you. As to Charles, my body servant, I have brought him into a free State, and by the law, he is free; and if he wants to go with you, he is at perfect liberty to do so." (Charles grinned and showed no disposition to leap into the arms of Mr. Mendenhall and his compeers.)

Mr. Mendenhall and his company, by this time grown smaller, some having vanished in the great crowd, showed no disposition to accept his offer, and then came his eloquent and scathing peroration over Mr. Mendenhall's head, ending with the words, "Go home, Mr. Mendenhall—do good in your own neighborhood, feed the hungry, clothe the naked, relieve the necessities of the poor, the sick, the fatherless, and the widow; attend to these duties, and I will endeavor to attend to mine." Then came a mighty and prolonged roar, or cheer, you might call it, from the excited ten thousand in which I joined, doing my best, and Mr. Mendenhall went into a hole, and pulled the hole in, and disappeared. As you well say, they did go home, and did attend to their own duties as exhorted, for they were really that kind of philanthropic men; and also saw to it that no votes they could influence in after time were cast for Henry Clay, the great Slave-Holder, whom Indiana yearly meeting set at its head, by the clerk, as they afterward misrepresented and made appear.

It always, in all the statements of this Henry Clay affair I have seen, made him speak too harshly on the "Go home" part of it. It did not strike me that way at the time, as you can guess by the full text of his speech as I have written in that part of it, but was scathing enough as it really was.

I want to say further, your account of the attendance of the yearly meeting the next day, was true in every respect as I saw it, and has never before been correctly written.

WILLIAM H. COFFIN.